A Key to Dutch History

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On 20 September 1839, the first railway line in the Netherlands was opened with a festive celebration. The steam locomotive “De Arend” took twenty-five minutes to travel from Amsterdam to Haarlem. A lot of people were not impressed: the train went too fast and made much too much noise. Was this novelty really necessary and was it safe? Near Ghent at the beginning of the same year, the steam boiler of a departing train had exploded. This innovation was doomed to failure and after all, barges were a fine mode of transport, weren’t they?

Despite all the initial scepticism, the first train heralded a time of enormous change. The Amsterdam-Haarlem line was quickly extended into what became known as the “Old Line” running from Amsterdam to Rotterdam. Work on the second major rail link began in 1843, connecting Amsterdam with Utrecht. More lines followed, all run by different railway operators. By about 1900, the train had become the most important mode of transport in the Netherlands.

Today, it is hard to imagine the enormous changes the railways brought about in Dutch society. Before the arrival of the railways, travelling cost a great deal of time. It was too expensive for most people and was sometimes dangerous. In terms of travelling time, the railways made the Netherlands much smaller. The improved links and travel comfort contributed greatly to the unification of the country: people from different regions came into contact with one another more often and the state was able to better organise its national territory.
The railway network was a pre-condition for the industrialisation of the Netherlands, which only really took off after 1870. Raw materials, products and workers too all had to be transported. In its turn, industrialisation contributed to the further expansion of the railway network. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Netherlands had a dense railway network. In the thirties, however, many lines were closed – particularly local ones. In 1938, all the lines were incorporated into one nationalised company: NV Nederlandse Spoorwegen (NS) that continued to exist until the reorganisation of 1995. The state and all kinds of lobby organisations are still actively involved in the now privatised NS and its services. This indicates that railways have remained a vital component of Dutch society.

Sub-topics

Primary education sector
Traffic and transport (from barges to trains and further)
Steam engines and steam trains

Secondary education sector
Infrastructure in the Netherlands, also from the European perspective
The English Industrial Revolution
The industrialisation of the Netherlands
Mobility issues

Past and Present
What are the advantages and disadvantages of public transport versus private transport?
Railways today (compare nineteenth-century and modern-day travelling times)
The Netherlands: from trading nation to industrialisation and back again?

In the Treasure Chest
An old model train, preferably “De Arend”
The first Amsterdam-Haarlem ticket
Steam engine

References

Places to Go
Utrecht: Spoorwegmuseum
Utrecht: Mobilion
Brussels: Belgian Railways Museum

Books for young people
Arend van Dam, Complot op het spoor (9+)

Background literature

Websites
www.kinderpleinen.nl/spoorwegen.html
www.spoorwegen.startkabel.nl/k/spoorwegen/index.php
www.ns.nl